

Statement of Paul Salem
Congressional Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on Lebanon
July 28, 2005

Chairman Hyde, distinguished members of the committee, I am honored to be here.

Lebanon today is taking the first steps in a new phase of its modern history. It has regained its sovereignty after years of external domination. It has just held its first elections free of outside control.

As we sit in the halls of Congress in Washington today, the new Lebanese government is sitting before the Lebanese Parliament in Beirut, presenting its platform, and seeking the Parliament's confidence. This new government is the first to be formed *in* Lebanon, rather than in a neighboring capital, for many years.

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14, marked the lowest point in Lebanon's modern political history; but the astounding outpouring of unity and nationalism that culminated in the mass demonstrations of March 14 marked the highest point. The Lebanese people shouted out their will to be free, to be united, and to participate in building a strong democracy. These were shouts that were heard around the Arab world.

It is true that there have been many disappointments since the heady days of March 14. The opposition promised one election law, but acquiesced in the passage of another. Leaders championed one set of political slogans, but ended up making electoral alliances that ran counter to them. The opposition itself split in two, and the elections ended up sadly reinforcing confessional divisions. The assassination of Hariri was followed by other assassinations and bombings. And the Syrian withdrawal was followed recently by border closings that have worsened an already difficult economic situation.

A lot has happened in the past six months. And for most of this period we were without a functioning government.

Today we are at the beginning of a new phase. The government sitting before Parliament in Beirut today is a coalition government bringing together parliamentary blocs and leaders from various tendencies and parties. Despite some structural weaknesses I believe it can achieve results in a number of areas.

The challenges it faces are many, and it has committed itself to addressing most of them; it needs our help and yours in overcoming those challenges:

First, with regard to security, it needs to move quickly to strengthen the army and internal security forces in order to fill the gaps left by the Syrian withdrawal. It also needs to reform and reorganize the intelligence services such that they are under civilian control and at the same time effective in preventing assassinations, bombings and other forms of terrorism.

Second, it needs to undertake fundamental reform of the political system by moving ahead with a new election law that would bring about more equitable and responsive representation, and a new political parties law that would help the country move away from the politics of sectarianism, patronage and personalities, to a politics of programs, parties and policies.

Third, having regained the ability to formulate its own foreign policy, Lebanon has to reconstruct its relations with its Arab friends, especially Syria, on a sound basis, and strengthen its relations with its friends in Europe and America.

Fourth, an independent and effective judiciary must be transformed from an empty slogan to a reality.

Fifth, we all need to work to strengthen and develop the institutions of civil society – NGOs, universities, media, unions, and political parties. It is these institutions that can provide the stability, unity and civility of democracy and ensure the continued integration between the population at large and the machinations of the political class.

Sixth, the government needs to make good on its pledges to undertake drastic reform in the public sector: to fight corruption, reduce waste, and dramatically improve efficiency.

Seventh, the government needs to build on the economic achievements of the postwar years by continuing to encourage Lebanese, Arab, and foreign investment and continuing to re-position Lebanon as a hub of business growth in the Arab East. The government needs to do all this while keeping government spending down and finding ways to manage our 35 billion dollar debt.

Perhaps the most complex challenge facing the government is the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and the disarmament of remaining armed groups in Lebanon, which means mainly Hizbullah and the Palestinian militias in the camps.

The Palestinians have been in Lebanon since their expulsion from their homeland in 1948. The conditions in the camps are very volatile with rival Palestinian militias jockeying for control and various fundamentalist groups also gaining footholds.

Lebanon cannot deal head-on with the issue of disarming the Palestinians in Lebanon; the last time that was tried, it led to the collapse of the state and a decade and a half of chaos and destruction.

The Palestinian issue in Lebanon is part of the Palestinian issue in general, and it will require patient and serious cooperation not only from the Palestinians but also from other regional and international partners in the peace process.

The issue of Hizbullah is quite different. Although it was established and backed by Iran, and although it enjoyed protection and support from Syria, it is in the end a Lebanese party, with Lebanese membership and leadership. Its main issue has been the struggle against Israeli occupation.

One must keep in mind that south Lebanon was subject to five Israeli incursions or invasions between 1978 and 1999, and was occupied for a full 22 years.

Most Lebanese have respect for Hizbullah's role in liberating south Lebanon and regard it as a major and legitimate representative of a large portion of the Shiite community. They also acknowledge that all Lebanon's militias, at one time or another, were involved in extra-legal activities. But most Lebanese would like to see Hizbullah continue to transform itself into a regular political party.

With regard to their disarmament, the Lebanese prefer this to be a political and negotiated process -- *not* an armed confrontation. No one in Lebanon wants another civil war.

A *possible* process might include a number of steps, such as an Israeli withdrawal from Shebaa Farms, followed by the deployment of the Lebanese army to the entire Lebanese-Israeli border, and the pullback of Hizbullah to behind army lines. Hizbullah's fighters and heavy weapons could then be brought under government control by integration into the Army as happened with other Lebanese militias after the war.

It is not possible in these brief comments to give a full assessment of the challenges and prospects facing the new Lebanon; (I have submitted two longer detailed statements for the record that deal with the issues in more detail) but it is clear that events are moving very quickly and great opportunities, as well as dangers, lay in our path.

The US and the International community, in general, as well as Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, have all played important roles in helping Lebanon regain its sovereignty; it is essential that our friends around the world continue to help us in the coming months and years.

Lebanon is a rare example of emerging democracy in a generally authoritarian region. It is a necessary example of Christian-Muslim understanding in a dangerously divided world. The demonstrations of March 14 and the momentous events that followed are examples of peaceful change in a world too often driven by violence. The Lebanese experience shows the triumph of cooperation over division, dialogue over monologue, moderation over extremism.

The US and the international community can help Lebanon by helping the Lebanese help themselves. We need continued diplomatic support and cooperation in dealing with the complex regional issues that penetrate our small country. We need support in rebuilding our army and security services. We need help in strengthening our state institutions and public administration. And we need help in managing our large public debt.

Other than that, we want to be the open country that we have always been; a place for investment, education, business, tourism, and cultural exchange.

We have been through a lot in the last thirty years, and the Lebanese people have shown that we have come through it united, determined, enthusiastic and able.

Statehood, democracy and growth are not new to us; we have finally regained the independence that can make their fuller development possible.

I am confident about our future, despite the complexities and dangers; we hope to always see our friends and allies by our side to build a more democratic, tolerant and prosperous Lebanon and Middle East.

Thank you.

Appendixes:

- Article entitled "Lebanon at the Crossroads," P. Salem.
- Article entitled "Twenty Key Issues for Building a Better Lebanon," P. Salem.